Settlement and social organization

The Merovingian region of Metz

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Introduction

A farewell to the 'longue durée'

Three hundred years is a long time; in important respects it was even longer in the middle ages. With average adult life expectancy in the forties a man might expect to die before he had seen his grandchildren. From a twentieth-century standpoint, however, we are accustomed to see the three hundred years of the Merovingian period as a single entity. Writers jump back and forth between the sixth and eighth centuries, and from the seventh to the fifth, and in doing so often make similarly huge spatial as well as chronological leaps from one anecdote to the next, crossing hundreds of miles in a single bound.[1] The flaws of such methodology can be highlighted by the simple expedient of adding 1,000 years to the dates in question. An early modern historian would be ridiculed who claimed that the evidence from fifteenth-century Provence, eighteenth-century Prussia and sixteenth-century Spain could be thrown together to make a single point about the nature of lordship, the status of women or patterns of family life. Yet the early medieval historian has come to accept such aggregation of evidence as valid, and the particular testimony of individual documents more generally applicable, in this period.

This 'melting pot' approach denies significant regional diversity or dynamic social change. As a result, we have grown used to thinking of the period *c.* 450 – *c.* 750 as one of 'transition', from the 'Roman' world to the 'medieval'; of the 'passage' from antiquity to feudalism. The image is of slow, barely perceptible change down a single path. Certain debates have focused upon the point on this unilinear 'path' at which slavery 'gave way' to feudalism, or where the ancient world 'yielded place' to the medieval (Anderson 1974; Wickham 1984; Bois 1992; Murray 1983:221 for explicit 'pathway' imagery). From this perspective, our participants in this transition will not have seen much change in their own lifetimes, even though their experiences were very different from those of their remote ancestors or descendants. The image of 'passage' or 'transition' also assumes that the situation on either

[1] This approach is so common as to defy any fair or meaningful selection. It is, for example, rife in Doehaerdt 1978 (see, for example, pp.85–127). Even as prominent an early medievalist as Janet Nelson has not always escaped its temptations (cp. Nelson 1990:72–4). Similar, or worse, cases of diachronicity could be drawn from many other pieces, such as Halsall 1989. Morris (1992:10–11) makes a similar criticism of classical social history, and Van Dam (1993:13) of the study of saints' cults.

side of the period of transition was, in some way at least, uniform or constant. This is, for example, a major flaw in Bois' (1992) analysis.

This book attempts to confront such imagery. It is true that mid-eighth-century society was very different from that of the mid-fifth. The 'passage' from one social organization to the other was not, however, pre-ordained. It is no mere truism to say that the 'passengers' themselves, the people of the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, did not know where they were going. They experienced many changes in their lifetimes. Those who lived through the stress of the early eighth century must have been aware of changes. But so too were those who lived in the turbulent days of the end of the Roman Empire and the break-up of its social order, and those alive in the decades around 600 when the aristocracy was consolidating its power. There were, in short, many changes in social organization between 450 and 750.[2] Each change was brought about by social struggle, but each did not in itself mark a 'step' on the 'road' to feudalism. There was no reason why at each juncture a different outcome could not have been produced, why our passengers could not have carried on in a completely different direction, or even set off back to a social structure similar to that of the late Roman period (as far as kings were concerned, this was usually what they thought they were doing). The path from antiquity to feudalism in north-eastern Gaul was a difficult, winding and tortuous one, cut by the people of the time with few or no sign-posts to help them.

Society changed dramatically between 450 and 750, but no more so than it had done between 150 and 450 or than it was to do between 750 and 1050. Single processes of transformation are only discernible with considerable hindsight. When we define them, from our modern viewpoint, we mask many histories, especially when we study predetermined transformations on a broad geographical as well as chronological scale. Studies which concentrate upon describing specific changes in the patterns of landholding suffer when they attempt to explain them in terms purely of lordship and dependence; should we not also examine the effects of such processes on family structures, gender relations, the social roles of age, fictive kinship and so on, and vice versa? The compartmentalized areas of social history, such as women's history or the history of the family, suffer similarly in their analyses by exclusion of the wider patterns of socio-economic interaction. The brilliance of Bloch's (1962) study of feudal society derives in part from its breadth of scope.

The approach adopted here has been at once to narrow and to broaden: on the one hand to narrow the geographical basis of the study, but, on the other, to broaden its thematic coverage, though it is still by no means comprehensive. In these general terms, the agenda is not dissimilar to Guy Bois' in his examination of Lournand (1992) or that of Wendy Davies' (1988) excellent study of Carolingian Brittany. Though focusing on important social changes around 600 AD, I have retained the long, 300-year time-span, in order both to put these changes in perspective and to show how society did not remain static before or after these interesting decades. Although they

[2] Goetz 1993:50 makes a similar point; he too, nevertheless (*ibid.*:34–5), treats all 'Germanic' law between *c.* 500 and *c.* 750 together to make a single point about post-Roman slavery.

exist[3], regional studies of the immediately post-Roman centuries have not yet been used to stress regional variation in the chronology of social developments or local diversity of experience. The reasons for this are, I suggest, twofold. The first is a belief in a kind of cultural uniformity of the post-Roman West, be it founded in a homogenous Germanic culture,[4] the common instincts of 'heroic' society, or both (Hedeager 1992), or in a common Roman heritage (Fouracre 1992). The second is a belief in the primacy of written evidence, which is sparse by later standards. Just as, as mentioned, it has frequently been drawn from very different times in order to make up a 'complete' picture, so it has also been trawled from widely differing places. This aggregation of evidence, of course, produces a picture of monolithic early medieval society, and so we return to where we started: the view of the Merovingian period as one when it took 300 years to move from one social organization to another.

Unidisciplinary analyses have exaggerated the problems just outlined, but so have studies of particular forms of evidence (settlement archaeology, burial archaeology, saints' lives, legal material, etc). The restriction to a single evidential form has produced mutually exclusive explanations of social change. For example, some settlement studies (Percival 1976:ch.8) hypothesize about the nucleation of society around powerful people, whilst studies of burial evidence (e.g. Samson 1987a) stress social instability, and competition.

It is easy enough to criticize previous attempts at analysis; what are we to put in their place? To begin with, a 'multi-disciplinary' approach has been adopted. Rather than skipping back and forth from documentary data to archaeological, each body of evidence has been analysed on its own merits. Where possible, even different sub-types of data have been examined separately (this is particularly true of cemetery, rural settlement and urban archaeological evidence). Data have been contextualized as rigidly as possible in time and space, and conclusions reached from each category of information are merged at a higher, more critical level.

The premise behind this approach is that cultural practices are deliberate, meaningfully constituted and historically contingent. This is true whether we are talking of the naming of children, the design of a belt-set, the lay-out and furnishing of a grave, the plan of a house or settlement, the contents and structure of a law-code, charter or saint's *vita*, or the specific words chosen to express a writer's thoughts. The use of particular grave-goods in individual burials, or of different shapes, sizes and colours of ceramics in varying contexts is thus deemed to be significant and studied as such. Internal semantic analysis of texts is also held to be valid; as has long been argued (cp. Campbell 1979), writers did not use words at random.

[3] For example James 1977; Kaiser 1973; Rouche 1979. There are very many more artefactually based archaeological regional surveys. For the region in question, see the invaluable Clermont-Joly 1978; Simmer 1987, which contains a bizarre attempt at synthesis; and Stein 1989b.

[4] This is an incredibly pervasive idea, although founded ultimately upon Germanist philosophies of the last century. As another unfair example pulled from a veritable sea of possible instances, see the 'unity of culture and ethos in Germanic society' (Burnell 1988:402). Archaeologically it is manifested in the idea of the *Reihengräberzivilisation*, the 'row-grave-civilization', spreading from northern Italy to northern England. This term reduces widespread regions to (blatantly false) cultural uniformity simply on the grounds that their inhabitants buried their dead with grave-goods, hardly a historically or geographically restricted phenomenon.

Transformations in the nature of society will thus be represented in a broad spectrum of cultural traces. This study attempts to show how different areas of human activity reflected the same processes of social change. Its theoretical starting point has been influenced by the post-processual archaeology (e.g. Hodder 1986; Miller 1985; Shanks & Tilley 1987; Tilley (ed.) 1991), but some early medieval historians have recently been advocating a more rigidly contextualized approach to documentary evidence, studying individual texts separately and seeing them similarly as actively, meaningfully constructed and historically contingent (Fouracre 1990; Wood 1992a). Ultimately, we should see all our evidence as 'textual', whether the text be formed by the marking of recognized signs on parchment, or the arrangement and display of understood material symbols in burials.

The study area and its geography

The study focuses upon the Roman *civitas* of Metz (fig. 1.1), whose bounds, it seems, later crystallized as the diocese of Metz (see below). The evidence from the *civitas* was often, however, found to be insufficient to test ideas

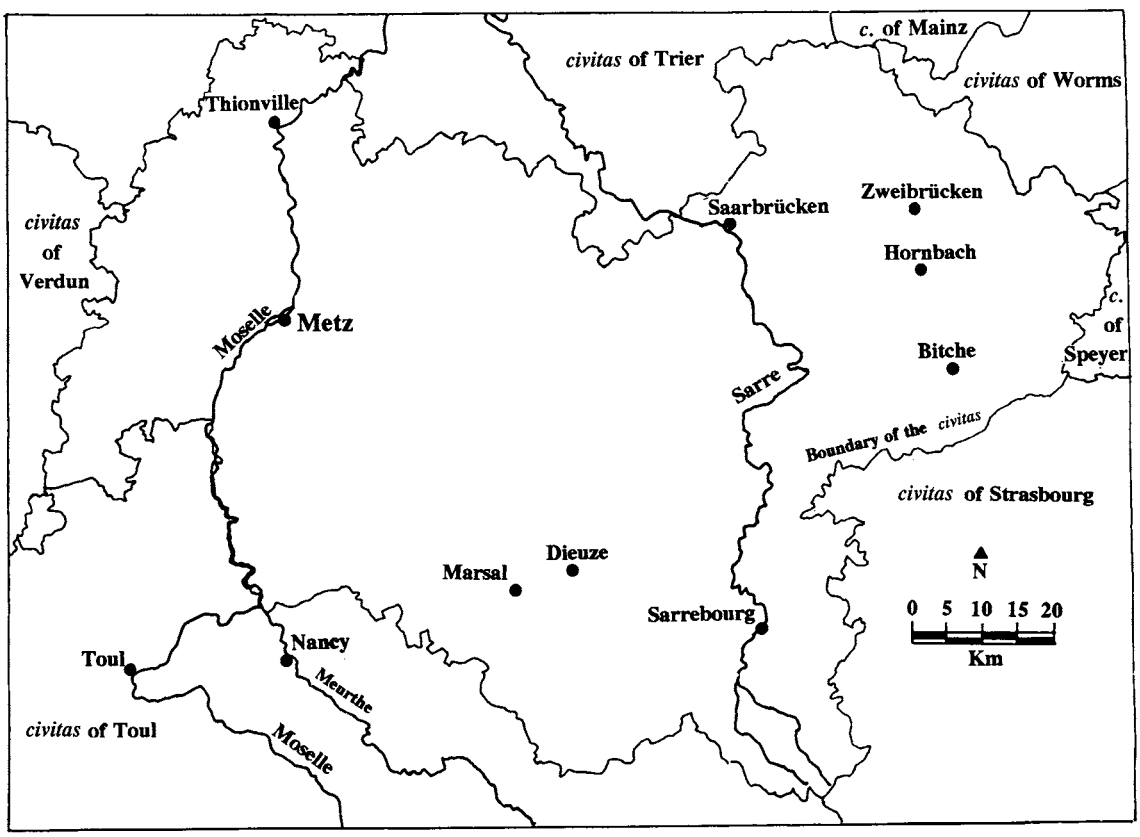

Fig. 1.1 The civitas *of Metz*

about social organization, so evidence was selected from a slightly wider area, the region of Metz of the title (fig. 1.2), extending south and west of the *civitas*. Evidence from north and east of the diocese was not discussed, partly because the Triererland has been thoroughly, and splendidly, studied (Böhner 1958; Ewig 1954), and partly because of physical geography.

The region of Metz forms the north-eastern corner of the Paris basin, bordered to the north and east by the Hunsrück, Pfalzerwald and the Vosges (fig. 1.3). The Vosges, sandstone mountain ranges reaching up to 1,420m above sea level at their highest, drop gradually to the Plateau Lorrain, the foothills reaching down to the Sarre valley. In this region the highest peak is Le Donon (1,009m), traditionally seen as the boundary between the *civitates* of the Leuci, Tribocci and Mediomatrici. The Plateau Lorrain, gently rolling country, generally between 200 and 300m above sea level, is formed of Jurassic limestone. It descends gradually to the Moselle valley to the west and the Seille valley to the south. Around the Seille valley is the Saulnois, roughly corresponding to the Merovingian *Pagus Salinensis* (see below), an area involved in salt production since prehistory. The border between the *civitates* of Metz and Toul appears to have run along a series of low hills, but this division is not strongly marked geographically.

The Seille valley is broad and shallow and, to the north of Metz, the Moselle valley appears to be a continuation of this feature. South of Metz, the Moselle valley is narrow and, particularly to the west, quite steep sided, the slopes being heavily wooded. Whereas the ascent from Metz eastwards to the Plateau Lorrain is relatively gradual, moving west from the city one

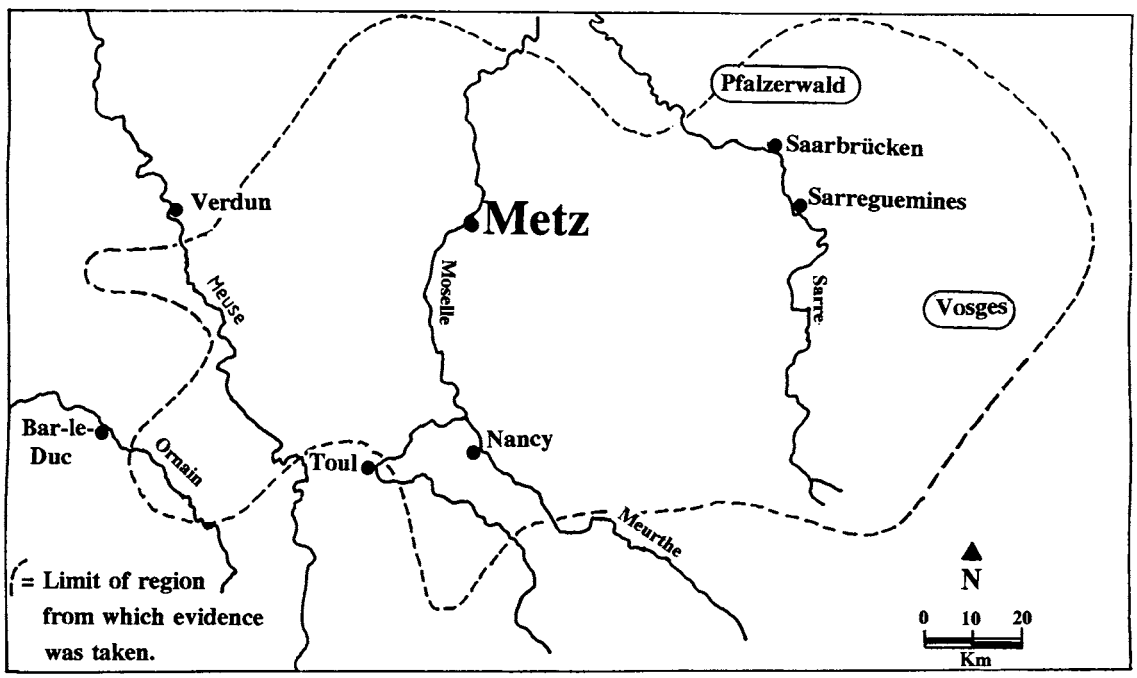

Fig. 1.2 The 'region' of Metz

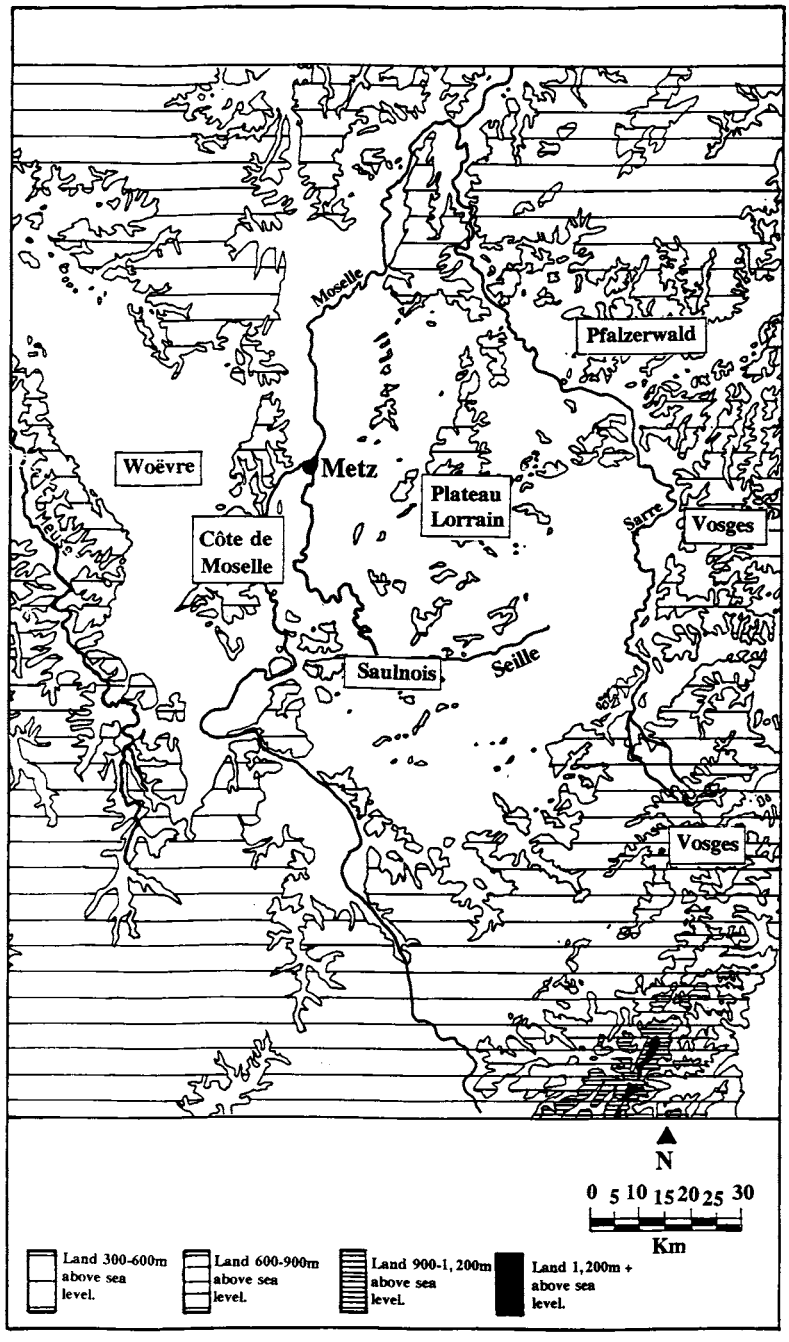

Fig. 1.3 Physical geography of the region of Metz

is immediately confronted with a steep climb up the Côte de Moselle, wooded and difficult to cross. To the west of the Côte de Moselle is the plateau of the Woëvre, the Merovingian *Pagus Wabrensis*, broken up by meandering water-courses and *étangs* of varying sizes. Further west, the boundary between the *civitas* of Metz and those of Toul and Verdun is not particularly well marked geographically. South of the Woëvre the border between the *civitates* of Metz and Toul is clearly marked by the valley of the Rupt de Mad.

The boundaries of the *civitas* of Metz are thus geographically much less pronounced to the south and west than to the north and east. The Merovingian diocese forms more of a unity with the remainder of modern Lorraine than with the regions of Trier, Worms, Speyer or Strasbourg, and this is visible in the material culture of the Merovingian period. The cemeteries of Alsace and especially those of the hilly Triererland are rather different from those of the much lower-lying *civitates* of Metz, Toul and Verdun.

Historical background[5]

The end of empire

Exactly when the effective power of the Western Empire ceased to be felt in *Gallia Belgica* is a matter of debate. There may be a case for seeing the beginning of the end as early as 388, with the suppression of the usurper Magnus Maximus. It is difficult to see much imperial activity in the region after that date, though that may result from a gap in our sources, which might have been filled by the lost *Histories* of Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus and Sulpicius Alexander (*LH* II.9). The extracts from Sulpicius quoted by Gregory of Tours hint that much of the government of the region had passed to the control of 'over-mighty' barbarian mercenaries, such as Arbogast, and that campaigns on the frontier could take on the form of licensed intertribal feuding.

After the invasion of 406–7, during which, Fredegar (Chron. II.60) claims, Metz was sacked, these suggested trends were exaggerated; barbarians and local 'tyrants' took the centre of the political stage. The extent to which Honorius' generals had restored stability by 420 should not be overestimated. Campaigns against the Franks were still necessary (as in 428) and the Burgundian kingdom, established by treaty in the north-east in 413, had to be destroyed in 436. By the 440s our fragmentary sources paint a picture of the dissolution of northern Gaul into a myriad of small local units, be they led by local Gallo-Romans (either the problematic *Bacaudae* or apparently legitimate local counts), officially sanctioned barbarian settlers (such as the

[5] This account of the Merovingian history of the region need only be brief. For general histories see James 1982 and 1988a; Geary 1988; and, most recently and thoroughly, Wood 1994, which arrived just as the final touches were being put to this book. The essays in Wallace-Hadrill 1962 and 1975 retain their great value. For Austrasia itself, see Ewig 1952 and 1953; Cardot 1987; Picard 1988. Hermann (1963) summarized the state of research in many aspects of the history of the diocese of Metz in the early 1960s.

Alans), or 'invading' barbarians such as Franks, Alamans and Saxons, to whom, though not technically barbarians, we might add Britons.

By about 418 the administrative centre of Gaul had moved to Arles. The Trier mint ceased to strike for the emperors before 420. If any coins were minted there between 420 and 450 they were impoverished bronze 'Ae4' coins (Brenot 1991:172), and possibly a small series of silver imitation *solidi* which have sometimes been associated with Aëtius (Lafaurie 1964), though King (1992) rejects this idea. In Gaul north of the Loire, the period between 420 and 451 can be characterized as political decentralization moderated by armed force. The military and diplomatic skill of the patrician Aëtius gave a semblance of unity to the disintegrating edifice. Apart from Salvian's gloomy descriptions of the devastation of Trier and other cities, and of the hardships endured by the rural population, contemporary sources are almost silent about *Belgica Prima*.

This phase was ended by Attila's invasion of Gaul in 451, which led to the famous sack of Metz on Easter Eve that year. The political events leading to the Hunnish defeat at the Catalaunian Fields, and those which followed the battle, culminating in the murders of Aëtius and Valentinian III (454–5), were decisive for Roman Gaul. Even more than those of Aëtius, Aegidius' valiant attempts to maintain an effective imperial presence in Gaul between 454 and 464 can be described, borrowing Kapelle's (1979) excellent phrase, as 'government by punitive expedition'. It is, however, worth remembering that Aegidius was himself an 'illegitimate' leader for the last three years of his life. He was murdered in 464 and the Roman Empire north of the Loire came to an end.

The Frankish settlement

In 443 the Franks sacked Trier. Perhaps in the late 450s they were campaigning in the Rhineland, driving Aegidius' troops, or more probably allies, from Cologne and Trier (*LHF* 8); in 463 they fought alongside Aegidius on the Loire, against the Visigoths (*LH* II.18). James (1988a:64–77; 1988b) has argued that the extension of Frankish power into the Paris basin took place as early as the period between *c.* 460 and *c.* 481, under Childeric I. James' scenario, making the alleged *Rex Romanorum* Syagrius into a count of Soissons (1988a:71), accords well with the outline given above. Certainly the Moselle valley had come under Frankish influence by the later fifth century, whether through the medium of Frankish counts such as Arbogast of Trier (Sidonius Apollinaris *Ep.* IV.17; *Ep. Aust.* 23), or of the petty kings of the Rhineland Franks (perhaps Arbogast himself was such a *regalis*). By 511 the Merovingian kings of the Salian Franks had acquired control of the region, which became part of the *Teilreich* of Clovis' eldest son Theuderic I.

The idea that the *Teilreiche* resulted from the Merovingians treating their kingdom as partible family inheritance was challenged by Ian Wood (1977), who argued persuasively that the division was brought about by the political circumstances pertaining at Clovis' death. Theuderic had possibly been given a kingdom to rule during his father's lifetime. He was certainly old enough,

as Gregory (*LH* III.1) makes clear. If the original promulgation of Salic Law is associated with Clovis, and there is no decisive reason to reject this traditional view, it may be that it was first issued in association with the Council of Orleans (511), just as the promulgation of Ripuarian Law is possibly to be associated with the Council of Clichy (626).[6] The specification (*PLS* 47) that Salic Law applied between the Loire and the 'Carbonarian Forest' has often (most recently Wood 1994:112) been used to date the code before 507, the battle of Vouillé and Clovis' subsequent conquest of the rival Frankish kingdoms in the north-east. However, if we associate the earliest version of Salic Law with the Council of Orleans, the geographical provisions of clause 47 are less surprising. The bishops of what was to be Austrasia are not to be found among its signatories (Pontal 1989:47–58 and map 1); on the other hand, twenty out of thirty-two signatories are bishops of sees between the Loire and the Ardennes. With the former Gothic kingdom south of the Loire covered by the Breviary of Alaric, Clovis was perhaps promulgating a code for the remainder of his kingdom (southern Belgica II, Lugdunensis II and III, and Lugdunensis Senonia: the later Neustria). The lack of religious provisions in the *Pactus* would be explained by the promulgation, on the same occasion, of a series of canons from the council. If correct, this reading might suggest that the north-east (including the former rival Frankish kingdoms) was already ruled by Theuderic (this would be suggested by the signatories of the Council of Orleans in any case). If Theuderic did become sub-king in Austrasia by 511, Chlotild's political achievements on behalf of her sons, suggested by Wood (1977), were all the more remarkable.

Whatever the case, by 511 the settlement of north-eastern Gaul by the Franks was long under way. Tracking the progress of Frankish colonization is extremely difficult (James 1979 remains essential). In the absence of written sources, archaeological cemetery evidence and toponymic data have been used. The archaeology of burials has given rise to two means of distinguishing Germanic settlers from indigenous Gallo-Romans. The first, physical anthropology, need not detain us long. Although, alarmingly, still recommended by the Director of the DAHL in 1988 (Burnouf 1988:114), and still popular in Merovingian archaeology, the scientific foundations of the approach are utterly invalid. The measurement of skulls, with long-skulled, dolichocephalic individuals being Germans and round-skulled, brachycephalic persons being Gallo-Romans, still features in Merovingian cemetery reports (Simmer 1988) but has long been shown to be unjustifiable. The use of palaeopathological traits within cemetery-using populations to identify migrants and natives is similarly flawed, even in the rare instances where the results are statistically significant. Like many other aspects of Merovingian archaeology, it suffers from an inability to consider its premises. It is unlikely that there were two separate and physically distinct ethnic (let alone racial) groups within Merovingian north-eastern Gaul. Clearly

[6] The most recent opinions of the date of *Lex Ribvaria* have rejected the early belief in a Carolingian, ninth-century date in favour of one in the reign of Dagobert (Rivers (trans.) 1986:7–11 and refs.). This could be placed in 622, when Dagobert was established as king in Austrasia, or in 631, when he placed his son, Sigibert III, on the throne at Metz. However, the events at Clichy, which established formal frontiers between Austrasia and Neustria and averted the threat of war, would seem to be a more plausible context.